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ABSTRACT

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Attributes of the Community Environment and the Individual's Quality of Life

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Abstract

A random sample of 114 adult residents in different communities rated the importance of various attributes of their community environment in affecting their quality of life. Factor analyses of the ratings reflect five dimensions or value orientations and are labeled as: institutional maintenance, commercial maintenance, personal development, recreation and relationship. As predicted, only the recreation value orientation is related to individuals' satisfaction with life in their community. The rationale and implications for the relationship between the various value orientation and satisfaction findings are discussed, particularly in the light of past research and theory of environment perception and evaluation (e.g., Insel and Moos, 1974).

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Streams of articles in the popular press often vilify or glorify the quality of life individuals experience in modern society. Governmentally funded programs, such as the Rural Development Act of 1972, avowedly attempt to monitor or to enhance the quality of life enjoyed by the nation's citizens. Concurrent with this popular concern, psychologists have become increasingly interested in the individual's perceived quality of life in his daily environment (cf. Campbell and Converse, 1972).

Among others, Rossi (1972) has noted that a high proportion of the person's overall perceived quality of life depends upon the environment provided by his residential community. Hence, if we are to identify those environmental requirements for a satisfactory overall perceived quality of life, we must have information about individual's judgments of the degree their subjective quality of life depends upon particular attributes of their community environment (e.g., upon proximity to friends, job availability, recreational opportunities). Such information, then, is important to the development of a model of the optimal social environment. In addition, this information would facilitate direct attempts to enhance the quality of life in a community; i.e., it would provide a change agent with a useful frame of reference in assisting residents to alter the present community environment to suit their needs and goals.

The judged contribution of various community attributes to perceived quality of life is also important to theories specifying the dimensionality of people's perceptions of their social environments (cf. Insel and Moos, 1974). Support for current concepts is based heavily upon studies of individuals' reactions to the actual social environments, typically an institutional environment, in which they are regularly immersed. Further, these investigations have principally analyzed environments (e.g., corporations, psychiatric institutions) in which a restricted range of personal characteristics may have been represented. Investigation of the judged importance of various community attributes to subjective quality of life not only would help to assess the generalizability of such concepts from the actual social environment to a more hypothetical one, but also would permit the use of a more representative subject sample.

Unfortunately, relatively little is known about the pattern underlying people's judgments about the contribution of various aspects of the community to their perceived quality of life. Most past attempts to identify the contribution of various community attributes to quality of life typically did not assess the individual's own judgments. In fact, some of those studies simply assumed that certain community attributes were necessary to the individual's perceived quality of life. Others identified the contribution of a community attribute by correlating a measure of the actual condition of that attribute with an "objective" (e.g., divorce rate) or a subjective (typically, a self report index of happiness) measure of the individual's overall perceived quality of life. The conceptual ambiguity of the term "perceived quality of life" and the probable lack of equivalence between many objective and self report indices suggests that sole reliance upon these approaches may inadequately reflect the felt importance of various community attributes to the

person's perceived quality of life. Those studies that did measure the individual's judgments did not assess their interrelationships in the light of more general theories of social perception.

Do judgments of the importance of various community attributes to one's perceived quality of life reflect a small number of underlying dimensions (i.e., value orientations)? Which community attributes form a dimension? Insel and Moos (1974) hypothesized that three dimensions underlie perceptions of one's actual institutional environment: Blake, Weigl, and Perloff (in press) have attempted to apply these dimensions to perceptions of the community environment. Perhaps comparable dimensions underlie individuals' judgments of the contribution of community attributes to their perceived quality of life. The first dimension, "system maintenance and change," pertains to attributes ensuring the environment's long term survival. In a community context maintenance attributes may include institutionalized arrangements with the avowed goal of providing for the welfare of all community residents--e.g., the basic community services of medical care, law enforcement, and education. Included may also be those attributes, actually vital to the preservation of most communities, which are not institutionalized and which may not typically be recognized as having as a formal goal the welfare of all community residents--the availability of gainful employment and the existence of local stores and businesses. "Relationship," the second dimension is the extent to which persons provide warmth and support for each other. Pertinent attributes may be proximity to friends and to one's immediate and extended family. The final dimension is "personal development," i.e., characteristics of the environment facilitating personal growth and the development of self esteem. In applying this dimension to the community environment, Blake et al. (in press) limited their attention to

the recreational-entertainment facilities of a community and did not assess other community attributes potentially providing residents with personal growth opportunities, such as cultural activities, hobby clubs, etc. Although recreational facilities may indeed be used for personal development, however, they also can be used for many other reasons, e.g., temporary escape from the stresses of one's daily life (cf. Peterson, 1972). Perhaps, then, recreational facilities, particularly of the outdoor type, may form a dimension separate from other attributes potentially providing self-development opportunities.

A secondary purpose of the present study was to assess the relationship, if any, between the strength of a person's value orientation (i.e., his position on a perceptual dimension) and his satisfaction with life in his present community. The extent to which value orientations are predictive of one's overall satisfaction with community life should depend upon whether or not the relevant attributes at present are functioning adequately to meet residents' needs. If an attribute is not functioning adequately, individuals with a stronger value orientation should be less satisfied with present community life than are those with a weaker orientation. By definition, maintenance attributes should be functioning at least at minimally adequate levels and, hence, the strength of the maintenance orientation should not be strongly related to community satisfaction. The relationship orientation, also, should not be predictive; community satisfaction should be more a function of the character of the interpersonal relationships rather than of proximity to potentially supportive others per se.[1] On the other hand, Poplin (1972) has noted that, relative to metropolitan areas, smaller communities (communities analogous to those investigated here) have minimal recreational-

entertainment facilities. It was anticipated, then, that the strength of the recreation orientation would be inversely related to satisfaction with community life. No directional hypothesis was made for the personal development dimension.

In sum, it was expected that the judged importance of community attributes would reflect a maintenance, relationship, personal development and recreation dimension. Further, it was anticipated that the recreational dimension, but not the maintenance and relationship dimensions, would be related to overall satisfaction with life in one's present community.

Method

Subjects

A random sample of 324 adult residents of various communities in an Indiana county was drawn from telephone directories[2] and asked in a telephone contact to participate in the survey during October, 1974. One hundred and forty-three returned the questionnaire. To enhance the homogeneity of the respondents' actual community environments, the 114 who lived in communities of 10,000 to 35,000 inhabitants were selected for study.

Measures

Subjects rated the extent each of 12 attributes[3] was important to have in a community in which they "could be happy and content". Each attribute was rated on an 11-point scale anchored at "don't want" (1), "don't care" (6) and "want very much" (11). The attributes were: a) extensive entertainment facilities, b) cultural opportunities, c) opportunities for self improvement (like hobby clubs, adult education), d) civic and charitable organizations to join, e) high quality medical care, f) good schools, g) capable law enforcement agencies, h) nearness to friends, i) proximity to relatives, j) good stores

and shopping facilities, k) much outdoor recreation and l) availability of good jobs. Further, subjects completed an 8 item scale about their satisfaction with living in their present community.[4]

Results and Discussion

Dimensions

Importance ratings were intercorrelated and factor analyzed by principal component-varimax rotation procedures (cf. Harman, 1960). Five orthogonal components were extraced with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. These accounted for 67.7% of the total variance. Rotation to the varimax criterion[5] yielded the factor pattern shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Factor 1 appeared to be the hypothesized personal development dimension, in that it was composed of civic-charitable organizations to join, opportunities for self-improvement, cultural activities and indoor entertainment facilities. These attributes permit the individual to explore and develop his unique skills and interests. Outdoor recreation and, secondarily, indoor entertainment formed a separate perceptual dimension, factor 5. The emergence of a separate recreation factor is consistent with the results of Blake, et. al. (in press), but does not support their assumption that the recreation dimension is identical to Insel and Moos' (1974) personal development dimension. More generally, the independence of factors 1 and 5 suggest that, although outdoor recreational activities and facilities can potentially serve a self development function (cf. Campbell and Converse, 1972), apparently individuals may not invariably see outdoor recreation in these terms.

Factors 2 and 4 pertained to the hypothesized maintenance dimension, i.e.,

perceptions of the importance of attributes relevant to the survival of the community and its residents. Factor 2 included medical care, law enforcement agencies and education. That education was a component of a maintenance rather than part of the personal development dimension is consistent with reports (e.g., Campbell and Eckerman, 1964) that education is popularly seen as a mechanism for training children in skills necessary for future survival and professional success rather than as an opportunity for self fulfillment as a person. While job availability was unloaded on any factor, good stores and businesses formed a separate dimension. In viewing the contribution of various community attributes to their perceived quality of life, individuals apparently differentiated between formally organized, service institutions with the avowed aim of providing for the welfare of all citizens (factor 2) and those attributes, vital for the preservation of community residents, which are informally organized for the avowed purpose of furthering the public welfare (factor 4). Perhaps factor 2 may be labeled an "institutional maintenance" and factor 4 a "commercial maintenance" dimension.

Finally, factor 3 was the hypothesized relationship dimension. Proximity to friends and relatives are attributes of the community environment which directly offer a person the opportunity for "emotional" support and continuing personal interest.

Relationship to Community Satisfaction

Responses to the 8 items of the satisfaction scale were converted to standard scores and entered into a principal component analysis. The individual's score on the first principal component, which had accounted for 54.6% of the total item variance, formed his community satisfaction score.[6] The person's satisfaction score was then correlated with his score on each of the five factors described above.

As hypothesized, the stronger the individuals' recreation orientations, the less satisfied were they with life in their present communities ($r=-.21$, $p < .03$). Scores on the personal development dimension, however, were unrelated to community satisfaction ($r=.10$). In line with expectations, scores on the institutional ($r=.10$) and commercial ($r=.01$) maintenance and on the relationship dimension ($r=.11$) were not predictive of community satisfaction.

Summary and Implications

Individuals' judgements of the degree to which their quality of life depends upon particular attributes of their community environment reflected five dimensions or value orientations; these were labeled institutional maintenance, commercial maintenance, personal development, recreation and relationship. This pattern implies that the frame of reference an individual uses to determine the environmental requirements for an acceptable quality of life (at least in his residential community) may be substantially comparable, though not identical, to the dimensions he uses to view his preferred residential community (Blake, et. al., in press) and his actual institutional environment (Insel and Moos, 1974).

The individual's value orientations were also found to be meaningful in understanding the person's perceived overall quality of life in his present community environment. The precise role of the individual's value orientations, however, may well depend upon the relevant community attributes. The recreation orientation was somewhat predictive of community satisfaction, whereas the other orientations were not. As previously noted, the strength of the individual's maintenance orientations should not have been predictive of community satisfaction, in that by definition the maintenance attributes function in a viable community to at least a minimally adequate degree.

Further, the relationship dimension should not have been predictive of community satisfaction, in that the quality of the individual's relationship with friends and relatives may be more critical to perceived quality of life than is proximity per se. Finally, the strength of the personal development orientation was not associated with community satisfaction. Although not tested here, it may be suggested that perhaps even among those with a relatively strong development orientation may weight these attributes relatively low when viewing their overall satisfaction with their community environment.

Footnotes

[1]Proximity to friends and relatives is treated here rather than the quality of one's relationships with these others. The former can be seen as an attribute of the community in that it characterizes one residential community more than another; the latter may logically transcend one's location in a particular residential community.

[2]Although the telephone company estimated that over 90% of county residents were listed in the directories, the survey results may not apply to individuals without listed phones, e.g., those in abject poverty.

[3]A myriad of community attributes could potentially be delineated. Twelve were investigated because they were sufficient to test the study's hypotheses. In addition, their level of generality permitted each to include a larger number of specific components, e.g., "good schools" was a composite of elementary, high schools, colleges, adult education and special education attributes. Finally, these 12 included the major functional components of a community's social system (Brooks, et. al., 1971).

[4]Illustratively, one item asked the respondent to indicate on a 7 point scale, ranging from "none" to "very, very much", the time and energy that must be spent before residents of the community would have a good place in which to live.

[5]The varimax procedure was used because, first, the theoretical approach specified independent rather than highly correlated dimensions. Second, the tendency of this procedure to "break-up" general factors was desired, for in the present case, a general factor could well reflect the presence of an artifact such as positivity bias (e.g., Blake, et. al., 1973).

Footnotes (cont.)

[6]Validating the scale as a measure of satisfaction with one's present community, the individual's satisfaction score was correlated, $r = .56$, with a separate 6 item measure of his willingenss to migrate from his present community.

Table 1

Factor Loadings of Community Attribute Ratings

Community Attribute	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	h
indoor entertainment facilities	.556	-.177	-.121	.299	.356	.571
"cultural" activities	.590	.252	.174	-.046	.094	.452
opportunities for self improvement	.632	.111	.059	.119	.166	.457
civic - charitable organizations to join	.701	.010	.044	.068	-.202	.540
high quality medical care	-.006	.700	.071	.135	.016	.513
educational system	.079	.459	.081	.313	.271	.395
law enforcement agencies	.161	.693	.112	-.054	-.114	.534
nearness to friends	-.075	.093	.663	.083	.286	.543
close to relatives	.228	.105	.543	.071	-.108	.375
variety of stores and businesses	.124	.146	.127	.670	-.029	.503
outdoor recreation	.293	-.131	-.035	.205	.517	.414
availability of good jobs	-.023	.037	.055	-.050	.274	.082
Total Variance	23.2%	15.3%	11.0%	9.5%	8.6%	----
Eigenvalue	2.788	1.834	1.318	1.141	1.032	----
Common Variance	42.1%	24.9%	14.4%	11.1%	7.5%	----

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